Lotus
AEOLIAN_MODE

Lotus

A disability-centric fanzine
about the characters and
world of My Hero Academia

Dear Reader,

We'd like to thank you for taking an interest in our humble project! The creation of this zine would not have been possible without our incredible team of creators, who poured so much heart into making this project as wonderful as it can be; our amazing mod team, who worked to make everything run smoothly; and, of course, Horikoshi Kohei, who created the world of Boku no Hero Academia. Once again, thank you so much for supporting LOTUS on our journey to explore disabilities within the BNHA world!

We hope you enjoy what we've made! This is a nonprofit fan-project. Boku no Hero Academia is the intellectual property of Horikoshi Kohei.

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—The LOTUS Mod Team

Cover illustration by Aeolian Mode

Mods

aavocado & greyedscale
Co-Head Mods

Aiysha
Formatter

Deviation
Finance

Caia
Art Management

Natsu
Marketing

Amiicee & Lilleeboi
Beta Readers

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Illustrated by Red!

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Illustrated by Ikearrr

一蓮托生 (ichi ren taku shou). A Japanese four-word idiom which means "to be born of the same lotus flower". There is a tenet in Buddhism that all humans have a common ancestor who sprang from a Sacred Lotus. Thus, 一蓮托生 is a phrase that means humans are all spiritual brethren and should avoid conflict—that we are all in this together and should be understanding of each other's differences. We believe that this encapsulates the theme of our zine, that while our mental and physical disabilities may make us seem different from others, we are all human in the end. We really wanted to convey this feeling that even in your lowest moments—even in the times where you feel most alone—there will always be someone out there that understands and empathizes with you. You are not alone in your circumstances.

We hope that, through the incredible creations of our talented contributors, this message has reached your heart. Thank you so much for coming on this journey along with us!

—*aavocado* & *greyedscale*, Co-Head Mods of LOTUS

Men With Fire (Cannot Help But Burn)
CalicoLynx

Tomura storms toward his room, anger and misery creating a nearly palpable cloud of negativity. He hates the bad days, the days when the pain makes getting through the tasks of the day like slogging through quicksand. Voices call out to him, trying to get his attention or stop his progress. Idiots.

"Fuck off." The words are bitten off, sharp as broken glass.

He stumbles into his room and throws himself onto his bed, pulling his knees to his chest and resting his forehead on them. Everything aches today. Frost ebbs into the base and chills his bones. Some of it is likely due to the weather, some probably from overusing his quirk recently. He always pays for using either of his quirks too much. Decay was bad enough, with its slow destruction of his body, but adding Sensei's quirk into the mix is simply too much to handle. If anything, he's now similar to that green-haired hero kid. Quirks too powerful for his body to contain without tearing itself apart.

It makes an unfortunate amount of sense: even if he is supposed to be a boss, capable of taking out all the other high-level characters, life has never been kind or giving to him. He's always ended up being nerfed just so he isn't too overpowered. That's what he deserves, right? If he had just gotten things right from the beginning—if he hadn't been forced to keep rebooting the game and starting over again—he wouldn't be sitting here lost in the haze of pain. He would have won the game ages ago.

Tomura is so lost in his storm of self-hatred that he doesn't

notice someone entering the room until a weight drops onto the end of the bed, just past his feet. He looks up, ready to snarl at whoever dares encroach on him right now, but he freezes when he recognizes who joined him.

Dabi sits there, a glass of water in one hand and a bottle of pain meds in the other. He reaches over and sets both down on the nightstand before sliding his hands into his pockets. His eyes lock on Tomura, filled with an uncomfortable kind of understanding. Dabi is the only one he is willing to allow into his space when it is bad like this. He isn't sure how it ended up this way, but they'd come to rely on each other since Dabi joined them.

Tomura honestly hadn't even noticed at first. It started with little things: learning each other's needs and helping hide weakness in the other from people around them. It simply grew from there as they learned about each other. Dabi introduced him to a topical skin cream to help relieve the constant itching and aching; Tomura helped Dabi when the staples that held him together were damaged in places he couldn't reach. Somewhere in all that, trust grew, and Tomura is genuinely fond of Dabi at this point. It's something he never planned—left it out of his calculations. He isn't supposed to care; it was never intended to be part of the game.

Tomura is shaken from his thoughts when Dabi finally breaks the silence.

"You gonna take them?" Dabi isn't looking at him, but instead still staring steadily at his lap. That was part of how they work too; neither of them found eye contact to be their favourite thing. They avoided it unless things were serious enough to need

it.

Tomura snorts, dropping his face back to his knees and tugging them closer. “Why?”

“‘Cause they make ya feel better, dumbass?”

“It’s what I deserve, after all. Bad things happen to people that deserve them, right?” Tomura hears Dabi sigh but refuses to look up and see the expression that accompanies it.

“Tomura, no. That’s . . . not why. You know that.” Silence falls for a beat, as he still refuses to acknowledge the medication sitting beside him. Dabi tolerates it for a while; the man has the patience of a saint when he wants to. Tomura has no idea how he manages it.

Finally the other man exhales in exasperation. “Denying yourself the care you need isn’t going to help, Tomura. It’s not gonna solve anything, or make anything better. You’re in pain; taking the medication will help that. Not taking it is a disservice not just to yourself but to the rest of us as well.” Dabi’s voice is gentle but full of steel, deadly serious.

Tomura’s head snaps up as he stares at him, eyes wide. “I’m *NOT.*” he protests.

“You definitely are, idiot,” Dabi says before pausing, meeting his gaze with a ferocious intensity. “We live with constant pain, yeah? But that don’t mean we have to live with the spikes too. If it’s too much, you fix it. You don’t just keep ignoring the house burning down around you cause you are used to a bit of smoke.”

"I guess so. . . ."

Dabi reaches over, picking up the glass and pushing it into Tomura's hands. He counts out several pills and holds them out for him to take, his serious expression telling Tomura that he isn't winning this battle of wills. When Dabi decides on something, it would be easier to sway the sun from its path than to sway him from his decision once his mind is made up.

Tomura sighs and takes the pills, washing them down with his favourite tea. He continues to nurse his tea in the contemplative silence, enjoying the soothing warmth he gains from it.

"I hate it," he says into the quiet. "I hate that it's like this—that it's only getting worse, not better. It feels pointless, like there's no reason to do anything, because it's not going to change anything."

Dabi doesn't respond for a time, before tilting his head slightly. "It's not pointless to care for yourself. It's not pointless to do things that make it more bearable."

"But it is, it doesn't *do* anything. It just hits the pause button temporarily. There's no real reason to; I don't see why I should bother."

"Is there a reason you think harming yourself will make anything better?"

"It's not harming myself, it's just not bothering to fight the nerf."

"It is harming yourself. Why not just use the meds to purify and continue playing in better form?"

June

“It’s pointless, Dabi, but it’s not self-harm. I’m not fucking doing that shit.”

“Denying yourself what you need is just damaging yourself, same as if you were taking a knife to your wrist. It’s just a different way of destroying ourselves.”

Tomura freezes as Dabi finishes speaking. Shock echoes through him like earthquake tremors, rippling the ground and shaking everything they touch.

“You been ignoring the burning house too long, Tomura. If it burns down, what then? Where does that leave you? The rest of us? You are the *boss*. Without you, everything is lost. Harming yourself harms us, damages the team, risks the mission.”

Tomura shudders, reeling. Dabi has called him out on things before, but not like this. Not this sharply, this carefully. He’s honestly never thought of things like Dabi pointed out; is . . . not taking painkillers . . . self-harm? Sensei never *had* cared all that much for his health, more if he was capable of performing or not. Kurogiri tried, but, well. That is an overly complicated relationship if there ever was one.

Rapid thoughts continue to bash against rocks in his head, a chaotic storm of emotions and white water which sucks him into its vortex like a battered and sinking ship. He is struggling for air that just doesn’t fill the void. Barely breathing now, he has a vice around his chest, emotion damming up his throat as he drowns in the miasma of guilt, grief, and other emotions.

He’s lost in the chaos when, like a lighthouse on the shore, he can

hear Dabi's voice cutting through the storm in his head.

"Breathe with me, Tomura, breathe. You've got this, come back to me, it's okay, just breathe with me now."

He resurfaces, becoming vaguely aware of his surroundings, of the warmth that comes from being pulled against Dabi. It's easier to catch the rhythm of his breathing now, the steady in and out like waves washing onto the shore.

The tempest eases, and he finds himself more and more present in the world instead of lost in his mind.

"That's it, you're all right, just keep breathing and focusing on me." Dabi keeps up a near-constant stream of words, the sound of his voice both helpful and soothing to Tomura.

As the darkness recedes and breathing eases, Tomura feels so incredibly tired. Bone-deep exhaustion seeps through him, along with the dull ache of familiar pain. He hates these days so much. Hates that he has to rely on someone else to save him from himself.

"You back with me?" Dabi murmurs, quiet and gentle. A hand runs gently up and down Tomura's back, occasionally drawing patterns and circles.

Tomura nods slightly, glancing down.

He stares at the glass that once held his water, mind a thousand miles away. It's a look that is intimately familiar to anyone that knows him well enough. So, like, almost no one.

Dabi lets out an exasperated huff, sounding simultaneously determined and utterly exhausted. Both were aimed at him. "When did you last sleep? I know you don't sleep much, but even you need sleep sometimes."

Tomura startles and glances up at him. Since when does anyone know him well enough to catch when he is getting overwhelmingly tired, let alone trapped in his pain? That still surprises him, it's so new. He shakes his head slightly. "Got things to do," he croaks, voice barely audible.

"Unless you been hiding things from us, *Boss*, there's nothing that urgently needs your attention so bad you can't sleep. You'll be better off and get more done when you aren't running on empty. You gotta take the time you need, Tomura. It'll do none of us any good if you crash and burn." There's an edge to Dabi's tone now, a brittleness that surprises Tomura.

He nods and starts to prepare, setting the cup down and pulling his shoes off before pausing to look at Dabi with a plaintive question written in his expression. He still doesn't know how to ask, but he needs it anyway.

"Of course I'll stay," Dabi says, voice gruff but soft. "I'll always stay when you need me."

Hope Is The Thing With Feathers
Platypus Pencils

VOICEMAIL FROM: TODOROKI ENJI

RECEIVED: MONDAY, APRIL 3rd, 11:02 P.M.

"Hawks. I . . . Dammit, I should've thought this through more before I called. Wasn't ready for it to send me to voicemail; you're usually leaping on the line before the first ring's even up. But I . . . I guess it's late. What time even is—mm. Yes, it's . . . it's late. I'll keep this brief.

"I heard the med staff finally sent you home. A step in the right direction, I guess. I hope you're well, both the burns and . . . everything else. I can't help but feel responsible for this. For all of it.

"Just . . . call me when you get the chance. Goodbye."

MESSAGE ENDED. DO YOU WISH TO REPEAT IT?

***

On the day the bandages are set to come off, Hawks saves the ones on his face for last.

The bandages peel like wrapping paper, unveiling the gift of burn-bubbled skin and roughened maps of tissue. He makes a futile attempt to cheer himself up as he unwinds the wrappings from his ribs, accenting the effort with a "magical

girl"-esque twirl, but all humour is lost when two wingless shoulder blades meet him in turn. With a heavy sigh, Hawks leans back toward the mirror and strips free the last of the bandages, revealing a face so staggeringly not his own.

The body in the mirror is streaked with pink and red plumes of scarring. A foggy sunset clouds his left eye—a threat of impending nightfall on his identity, his career, his future. It's a lot to carry on these scarred shoulders, so he wills the thought away and reaches for his toothbrush instead. A gob of toothpaste; hasty bristles scrub around his mouth. Minty foam grazes the corner of his wound.

As the seconds drag on, he can no longer stand the mirror. So he wanders his apartment for the remaining two minutes. Opts to spit into the kitchen sink instead.

He still drifts from room to room, more phantom than bird, now; some wingless thing ghosting halls he'd scarcely found the time to haunt before. He picks out a shirt with shoulder blade slits that he no longer needs. The air conditioning kicks in somewhere, the loud thump of a chilled heart within the ribs of his apartment, and Hawks pulls the top on tiredly as the hum fills his ears.

Arms in sleeves. Head through collar. The cold whispers at the bare slots at his back; two matching gashes, raw skin bleeding ice.

***

VOICEMAIL FROM: USAGIYAMA RUMI

RECEIVED: TUESDAY, APRIL 4th, 10:37 A.M.

"Hey, Hawksie! Don't tell me you're still sleeping in this late, else I'll have to show up at your place and sock you one! Real talk though, I . . . Uh . . . I just wanted to check up on you. I shouldn't be worried though. You've always been a trooper; a little fire 'n' brimstone ain't gonna change that . . . Hey, an-and neither is a bit of bad press, got that? Seriously, anybody actin' like . . . I dunno . . . Fuckin' Frankenstein's monster has more credibility than you do? Well, they're gonna get a face full of foot from yours truly!

. . . Joking aside, take care, Hawks. If anyone's got this, it's you, m'kay? So, yeah . . . See you back on the streets real soon, bird-brain."

MESSAGE ENDED. DO YOU WISH TO REPEAT IT?

***

There's a static buzzing down his spine. The feeling materializes as he flips through stations, a screen full of black-and-white snow on the channels his plan doesn't cover. With the money he makes, he supposes he could've ordered a wider cable package—but he'd never been the type with time to just sit around and watch TV.

Not until now.

A click of the remote. The prattling of a sports announcer. The sensation in his back has started spreading, termites buried under thick bark of scarring, gnawing at his wounds with growing urgency. He contorts an aching arm to scratch the best he

can. He isn't used to the lack of feathers against his skin; the absence makes the wriggling pain burrow straight into his blood.

Hawks groans, abandoning his efforts to scratch and instead rolling his shoulders against the tension. The pain ripples across the muscles of his back, knotted and gnarled, and Hawks tries his best to return to the TV. He always pictured blindness as pitch-black, nothing more—but in his one scorched eye, the reality swims instead in sickly colours, muddled and incomprehensible. In his good eye, the distance blurs, like a camera lens struggling to focus. The strain in his head joins the strain in his back.

Some Olympic athlete is on the screen, being interviewed about a recent shoulder injury. When the interviewer speaks, it's that spotlight-soaked excitement that Hawks is so used to, the tongue of cue cards and starstruck awe. There's a comforting familiarity to it, despite the muddy lapses in focus, and with one last roll of his shoulders, Hawks settles back on the couch. Speaks aloud in response as if this interview is his own, trying to let himself indulge.

" . . . But I see you here today, and I know I'm not alone in being just . . . so impressed by how quickly you've recovered."

"Speed's literally my trademark," Hawks quips, speaking over the athlete on the screen. "So it'd be pretty embarrassing if I chose now to start dragging my ass. They'd probably cut my brand deal with that one sportswear place. . . . Which they're probably gonna cut anyway since I just said 'ass' on live TV."

Any sponsor would be mortified by him now. Hawks saw his raw wounds once, on the first hospital day, reflected in a

nearby window as the nurse changed his dressings: his back was a pomegranate sliced open, seeds of blisters oozing, nestled deep in yellow-red flesh.

"You know, many of your fans feared you'd never be able to compete again."

"Well, my wings have always grown back before," Hawks forces out, ignoring the growing prickle still crackling through his spine. "Real dense of Dabi to think they wouldn't this time. Clip 'em, shoot 'em, burn 'em, who cares; they're gonna grow back. Who knows? Maybe my quirk's actually Starfish."

His wings aren't growing back. All that's left now is razed, ravaged flesh, open stripes of shirt yawning against a skin-scraping couch—and his wings are never growing back.

"Well, I'm relieved to hear it. You really are an inspiration. In fact . . ."

The ache in his back is ceaseless, and with a wince Hawks sheds the shirt, hoping the absence of scratchy fabric might give him some relief. Nothing noticeable. So he just picks mindlessly at his teeth, prodding for something that might not even be there; perhaps stabbing at his gums will lessen the stabbing at his spine. "Why, thank you, nameless interviewer," he garbles, not even sure what's being said anymore.

". . . That said, when are you looking to return?"

White nail sinks into pink gums, and he jolts back, already feeling feeling the crimson bubbling in his saliva. Hawks

swallows down the metallic twinge, half-seared vision drifting back to the TV screen. He stares as the actual interview subject answers for him. Hawks has no answer.

So he laughs. Laughs like he always does, a scoff into a chuckle, breaths dancing forward desperately to fill the space, bridge the gap of silence. But this time is different, and he can't stop it; the laughter bubbles like magma from his throat, thick and loud and untameable. For a moment, the wild laughter sounds just like Dabi's—and it's like something in him bursts. Matchstick memories strike across his back, eating away at wings that aren't even there, but he can feel them—*dammit*, he can feel them—sparks popping against his skin, blood boiling beneath his flesh, and he's on the ground now, just *laughing*.

Blood-tinged spit speckles the hardwood—the laughter's turned to yelling, fist pounding against the ground as the pain refuses to cease. The other hand wrings into his hair, gripping like a child to its blanket, desperate to fend off the monsters lurking under the bed. But they're all around him now, surging smoke into his screaming lungs, screeching laughter in his ears, stomping hissing boots across his back until he wishes his spine would snap.

And above him, phantom wings flap in a surreal absence, desperate for escape. They stay grounded by their own unreality; tethered deep in muscles, nerves, memory.

He cannot see them. He knows he never will again. But indeed, what hell it is to feel.

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VOICEMAIL FROM: MERA YOKUMIRU

RECEIVED: TUESDAY, APRIL 4th, 4:39 P.M.

"Look, I'm just gonna cut to the chase, Hawks. . . . The commission needs to talk with you. About our plans moving forward.

"Call us back ASAP. Goodbye."

MESSAGE ENDED. DO YO—

***

It's an idiotic choice of snack, popcorn. His misstep doesn't register until the kernels start popping, firecrackers bursting in his microwave and his mind, and Hawks is forced to leave the kitchen for his sanity. He returns to a bag of blackened puffs that he's too ashamed to throw away. So he sits alone and eats, charred flavour slicking ash across his tongue, the scent of burnt butter still tainting the air.

The barstool at his kitchen island is his new favourite seat; every other chair has been a bitter reminder of his state, backrests of sticky leather or frigid wood nipping at his scars. It's skin that was never meant to be touched by anything but feathers. Never built to be bare.

One hand lies in his near-empty popcorn bowl, and the other scrolls mindlessly through his phone, a sea of missed calls crashing in half-hazed waves before him. He clicks one of the more recent notifications—his stomach drops as Endeavor's voice echoes through his speakerphone.

The voicemail is brief. Murmured. He's never heard Enji this broken, and the nausea bubbles up from Hawks's stomach to his battered ribs. His thumb jabs at another timestamp.

Mirko now, chipper as he'd expect, and having just lost an arm, no less. He pictures her back in the field as she sends this, phone pressed against one scarred shoulder, feet thumping across the concrete like they'd never stopped. It's what she expects from him, what they all expect from him, and now his heart is pounding like soles against concrete ribs, until he can almost feel them cracking under the weight—

—He jabs another voicemail so hard his nail knocks the screen.

And then that damned private number; that damned exhausted voice. Mera's few sentences play out like some horrid orchestra, endlessly tuning in his ears, never actually granting him the relief of a song. *Plans moving forward.* Plans to disown him? Strip his license? Leave him retired young and discarded against his will?

His wings burn. His face burns. And then . . . his phone is burning too, vibrating in his hand with a number he doesn't recognize. He punches the answer button on reflex—cursing quietly, he has no choice but to bring the phone to his ear.

"Hawks." It's a familiar voice, but the last he expected to reach out in a phone call.

"Eraserhead?" Hawks forces a smile, one he hopes filters the defeat from his words. "That you, man? Damn, did someone leak my personal number *again*?"

“I got it from one of Endeavor’s sidekicks,” Eraserhead says. “On Tokoyami’s behalf.”

“Oh, man, Tokoyami. . . .” Hawks tips his popcorn bowl, watching shadow-black kernels flee back and forth. He shakes his head. Summons that smile yet again. “Hey, don’t let the little guy lose his head on my account. I’m right as rain.”

“. . . Mm.”

“That a grunt of agreement, or what? Sorry, buddy, I don’t speak Eraserhead.”

“That’s me not believing you for a second.”

“Heh . . .” Hawks props his elbow against the countertop, scars and statement both stabbing through him. “What, cause everyone knows my good ol’ dad’s a fucking fugitive? Real nice to know that suddenly makes me untrustworthy—”

“Tokoyami said your wings are gone.”

The smile strains. “They’ve grown back before!”

“And that Dabi burnt half your face.”

“Hey, I got another half. Plus, chicks dig the scarface look.”

“Stop. You’re just wasting breath.”

“Y’know,”—Hawks spits the word, expression verging on a sneer—“if you called to give me an inspirational speech, you sure

do suck at 'em."

"I didn't."

"Ah, gotcha." The fire crackles in his back again, and Hawks runs his fingers through sweat-plastered hair, still smiling, he has to *smile*, dammit. "Other way around, then, *I'm* such the inspiration, right? Well, I'm flattered—"

"Hawks."

"—but rest assured, I got plenty of people in my corner who already told me—"

"*Hawks*."

"—and they're all *counting on me* to get back out there—"

"It's shit."

A slap of confusion, and the smile finally falls. ". . . Huh?"

"Not you. But everything that happened. And how the media's expecting us to grin and bear it."

Hawks agrees. His reputation doesn't. Conflicted, he rolls his aching shoulders. "Heh, probably easy for an underground hero to say, but—"

"My leg's gone from the knee down. I'm out one eye. I've got friends dead and so do you." Eraserhead, blunt as ever, finally

gets Hawks quiet. “I don’t care if you’re some nameless vigilante or All Might himself. . . . You’re allowed to feel like shit.”

Hawks pauses. Breathes a smoke-twinged sigh.

“You . . . really think Tokoyami wants to hear that?” Hawks says. “He asks how I’m feeling, and you want me to tell him . . . it’s all gone to shit? You think anyone’s ready to hear that from the number two hero?”

“It’s your choice,” Eraserhead says. “But knowing Tokoyami, he can read right through false optimism.”

The room falls silent. Hawks swallows thickly.

“And so can I.”

His scarred face crumples slowly, painfully, and Hawks drops his head into his free hand. Salt and butter still smears his hand. Bites at ruined skin.

“. . . My wings hurt so fucking bad, Eraser,” he murmurs finally. “And they aren’t even there.”

“Mm.” Another grunt, but . . . a strangely sympathetic one. “I’ve had an itch on a foot that doesn’t exist for days on end. I know phantom pain’s inevitable in the long run. I’m sorry it’s hit you already.”

The shared experience hits something odd in his stomach, something comforting. Surprised, Hawks finally raises his head. “And my depth perception? Hell, if someone tried to throw me some-

thing I'd probably end up impaled."

"Mic thought it funny to toss me my house keys yesterday. You can imagine how that went."

Imagine he does, and it gets a chuckle out of him. Finally, he lets out another breath. "Man . . . what are they gonna do with us, huh?"

"Who cares what they do," Eraserhead says simply. "Who the hell even are 'they'? It's *my* eye, and *my* leg. I decide how to handle this."

A thought crosses Hawks's mind, and he can't stifle the snort that follows.

"What?"

". . . You gonna take it . . ." —Hawks purses his lips— ". . . one step at a time?"

For a moment, Hawks is scared he's offended him—but relief washes over as Eraserhead's monotone snark bites back. "Beginning to think you have a death wish."

A play-cringe from Hawks. "Too soon?"

"Please. Tensei Iida's been making wheelchair puns since I was discharged. You're not gonna beat any of those with a quip made . . . on the fly."

"I—" Hawks slams a stunned hand against the counter, the smile

on his face now real as can be. “Dammit, Eraserhead, that a wing pun?”

He can almost hear Eraserhead’s signature manic grin through the phone. “Too soon?”

And he’s laughing again, despite the pain in his spine and the blur in his eye and the phantom feathers still rustling in his ears. And as the words pour, what relief it is to vent, to relate, to *feel*. The conversation continues, and with every cackle, the ache in Hawks’s gut becomes the most welcome one. This whole body’s his; this beautiful, burnt, *breathing* thing, no matter what anyone expects of it. It’s his. And he’ll take all the damned time it needs.

And finally, his laughter’s no longer magma. It’s crisp air. A sparkle on his tongue. A mint in the mouth, fresh and cool, clearing the last wisps of smoke from his breath.

Peppermint Tea
Warpinator

Ochako is lucky enough that it happens on a Sunday. She put in extra training Saturday and already noticed a sort of pattern, so it shouldn't have been a surprise even if it hit like one. The persistent rolling of her stomach thrusts her into unwelcome wakefulness, and she barely makes it to the bathroom in time, head cupped in her hands as she sweats through what's quickly becoming a daily ritual.

A familiar low pain settles into the lower edge of her abdomen. If she stays still, she's fine, but with each small shift, she can't help wincing. Rubbing her fingers over the spot, she resists the urge to curl up as another cramp rolls its way through her.

Ochako doesn't want to spend her day hobbling between her bed and the toilet, with only her small flip phone as company, but pushing through these attacks is like using her quirk over its limit.

Doable, but bad for keeping her out of the bathroom.

That also means she's avoided eating, but Ochako is used to that too. Granted, that was before UA's affordable meal plan rendered her old habits null. Well, null until she started waking up every morning with the irrepressible urge to poop.

She tucks herself further under her sheets, willing sleep to come back. Already, most of her friends have texted, asking about hanging out or studying. That was something else she couldn't

do before UA—she was too busy training for the entrance exam and helping out her parents whenever she could.

Before her stomach troubles started, Ochako enjoyed this departure from her norm. Relaxing in her room all day had been a pipe dream until the dorms.

Now she's stuck there and hasn't even a penny to show for it.

Her stomach roils in agreement and she cradles it, side-eyeing the door. In times like these, she's grateful UA splurged on private toilets for each room. Sure, after this is over she'll have to clean it, but at least no one is gonna run into her making a mess of herself.

Attempting to find comfort, Ochako shifts, lying on her cramping side; the movement works and the roiling subsides. Her eyes flutter shut as she tries to burrow into the clean, soft cotton of her pillowcase. Like every time this happens, a thin sheen of sweat collects over her skin.

Not that the sweat is anything new—her nausea after using her Quirk provided that plenty, but at least her costume and gym uniform are sweat-wicking.

The pajamas she wears aren't, and it's something else she'll have to clean when the pain passes. The cycle of it all makes her want to scream.

Ochako almost does scream when her phone chirps loudly beside her ear. She fumbles with it, the screen lighting up as she pops it open.

Yaomomo: I heard from Midoriya you were ill. If there's anything I can do, please ask! I am making tea if you'd like some.

She smiles at the text. Ochako doesn't want tea, but at the same time she's well aware that the only liquids she's had came from brushing her teeth before crawling back into bed. With how often she's gone to the bathroom . . . well lectures about the dangers of dehydration are echoing in her skull.

Ochako: ty! sounds good, if u have peppermint i wouldnt mind :D

Peppermint helps when she's nauseous. It might help with her bowels, since it's so good for her stomach. Or at least, it won't hurt. Peppermint is pretty inoffensive, all things considered.

The phone lights up again.

Yaomomo: Of course! I'll be up soon!

Momo is such a proper texter. If it weren't for Mina and Tooru's indecipherable texts, Ochako would feel terrible about her own.

Ochako: ty again! :)

She snaps the phone closed, putting it back on the other side of the pillow. Her stomach gives an unpleasant lurch at that and she winces, curling inward again. A sharp, sulfuric smell rises out from the sheets, and Ochako flushes, slapping her hand over her face.

Nothing wrong with passing gas, but when she gets like this

there's no control over it and the smell is always the worst. Ochako hopes Momo doesn't come into this. Not that she thinks Momo would say anything or care, but once it happens the embarrassment is never going to leave.

She gives a frustrated growl into the pillow, tucking the sheets tighter against herself. Just in time, because a small knock comes at the door.

"Come in!" she calls, working the sheet under her foot. There: vacuum-sealed and reputation-saving.

Momo peeks in, smiling when she catches sight of Ochako.

"Hello," she murmurs and pushes the door open fully. She has a small tray balanced in her other hand on which two tea cups set. She comes closer, bending over to grab one of the zabutons by the table and dragging it to the bed.

"Sorry I don't have anything nicer," Ochako says. "If that's too small, you can grab the desk chair."

"This is fine!" Momo says, gracefully sitting seiza-style. She sets the tray on the floor and Ochako realizes that she's going to have to sit up.

She bites her lip and the bullet, struggling upward. Another flip comes from her stomach and she leans against the wall, keeping the covers tight around her bottom half with one hand.

The other she takes the warm cup with, the mint scent wafting from it. The sip she takes proves it tastes just as good as it smells.

Her stomach doesn't roll with the drink, so she takes a larger sip.

Momo takes a sip of her own, placing the teacup down after. She bites her lip, glancing up at Ochako. "If you don't mind me asking . . . what's wrong?"

"Ah," Ochako starts, meaning to say a stomach virus or food poisoning rather than explain her inexplicable symptoms when the hold she has on her lower body slips and the noise shatters the silence of the room.

Heat overwhelms Ochako's face and she tries to hide behind her teacup. "Sorry," she mumbles. Her stomach is cramping less, but the embarrassment of passing gas in front of Momo, of all people, makes her want it back.

"It's alright," Momo says, "I assume that's why you wanted the mint then."

Ochako peeks around the corner of the cup, relieved at the serene expression on Momo's face. Totally unbothered and merely curious, she takes another sip of tea.

"Yeah, it helps with nausea and cramping, usually." The heat from the tea recedes and Ochako probably looks less like a strawberry, so she lowers the tea to take another drink.

"Usually?" Momo arches a brow. "Does this happen often?"

Ochako winces. Though, she knows it probably won't hurt for Momo to know about her episodes. While luck has been on her side, there's always the chance that it'll fail one day on her, and

someone knowing would be nice.

"I get these episodes sometimes," Ochako says, looking down into the amber of her tea, "where my stomach just starts cramping. I get, um, bathroom issues too. Usually happens after intense training, but I've been unlucky on a rest day before."

Her shoulders tense at the last word. Her worries aren't so much that Momo will make fun of her or anything, but that she'll start bumbling in pity. Too much of that got thrown her way in junior high because of her financial situation, and to have it added to her health would be unbearable.

At the same time, her chest is lighter at the admission. Ochako isn't good with secrets, as much as she tries to be. She's too open for that; someone knowing the full truth of her episodes is nice.

Momo stays silent a moment, trailing a finger over the edge of her teacup.

"I'm sorry that keeps happening, Ochako," Momo says. Her eyes are soft and, Ochako would dare say, *understanding*; the relief of it makes her sag from her spot on the bed.

"Thank you."

Momo nods, but her eyebrows furrow and she taps the edge of the cup once with her finger. Ochako's seen that expression plenty of times in class when Momo's thinking of a particularly hard problem.

It's out of place here, and Ochako can't stop the words that tum-

ble from her mouth: “What’s up?”

“Oh!” Momo glances up again. “I was . . . I don’t want to be presumptuous, or—”

“Whatever you wanna ask, go ahead!”

Momo takes a deep breath, clearly steeling herself. “W-where does the pain come from?”

“On my stomach?”

“Yes, what part?”

Ochako frowns, glancing down to where it’s hidden under the blankets. “My right side mainly, but if it gets bad it spreads.”

Momo nods, tapping her fingers again. “I’m not a doctor, but . . .”

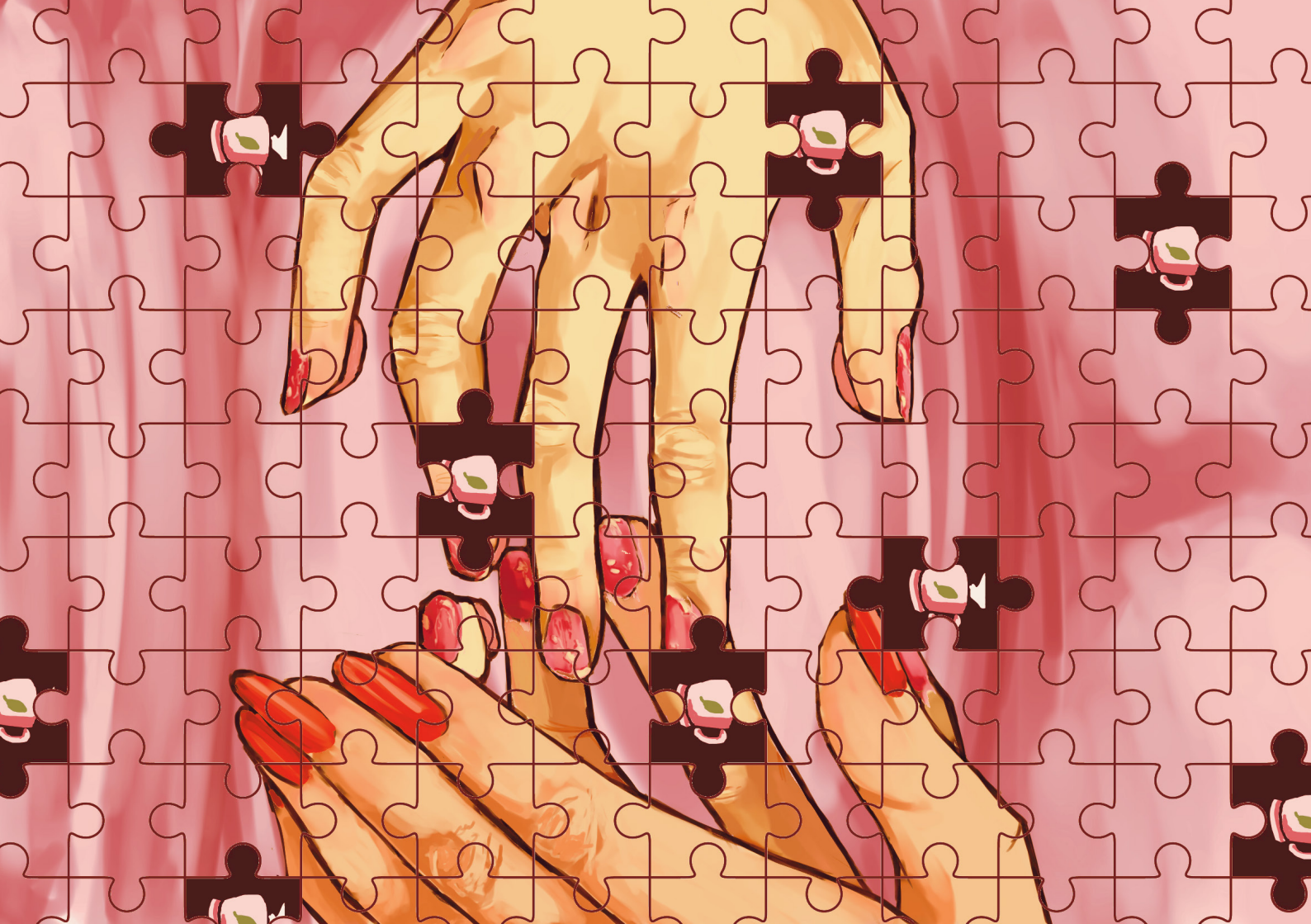
“But what?”

Her lips twist. “What you’re going through sounds similar to something I sometimes suffer from.”

“Really?”

Momo nods again, but it’s much more decisive. “Yes, when I was younger I had similar problems after intense training and recovering from my Quirk. The cramping, the bathroom issues, and even the nausea.”

Ochako struggles to sit up further, her stomach protesting. “Re-



ally?" she asks again, not hiding the hope bleeding through.

"Yes, it's called irritable bowel syndrome," Momo replies. "I have it mostly managed now, but after times of intensity, I still have the occasional flare. That's why I don't have dairy anymore, actually!"

Momo shifts, eyes darting to the side. "But as I said, I'm not a doctor. You should probably visit Recovery Girl or another doctor."

Ochako groans. "That takes time."

"Well, there are some things I could tell you helped me? If it is IBS, they should help you until you do have time?"

Ochako finishes the rest of her tea, setting the cup down on her side table. "Momo, that sounds wonderful."

Momo stifles a chuckle. "I'm still encouraging you to see a doctor, but the first thing we can do is . . ."

She furrows her brow again, reaching under her shirt. Familiar sparks from her quirk flicker out from under it and she pulls out a heating pad.

"Good for any cramps!" she chirps, unfolding from her position on the floor to lean over Ochako and plug it into the wall. She tosses the pad portion to Ochako, who catches it and stuffs it under the blankets on top of her stomach.

"Thanks!"

"The other stuff is a bit harder, I'm afraid," warns Momo as she steps back again.

Ochako sighs, the heat starting to creep into the heating pad. "Plus Ultra is our motto, you know."

Another snicker.

Ochako smiles.

Momo sits back down, leveling Ochako a serious stare.

"Right, right. Well, an elimination diet and a food diary are the next stages. Our Quirks may be one trigger, but food does make a difference."

Ochako scrunches her nose. "Eliminating what?"

"I have most of what I did still on record," Momo says. "So if you want I can help with that? The biggest thing for me was taking out dairy. An elimination diet is basically cutting food from your diet. And then also recording what you eat every day to see if anything might precede a bad flare."

"Makes sense." Ochako sighs. "Sounds like a lotta work, but I need to improve to be a hero. Gotta get all of *this*," she gestures down, "under control, you know?"

"Yes, I know," Momo says, tucking a piece of stray hair behind her ear.

The heat finally sinks in, and Ochako starts to go boneless, slipping back down so her cheek presses against the pillow.

“Thanks, Yaomomo.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll take the cups to the kitchen. Text me if you need anything else, okay?”

Ochako thinks of making a token protest but the heat is making her woozy with relief.

“Thank you again.”

“Never a problem, you’re my friend, Ochako.”

But It Still Shines
generally_nice

Denki wasn't exactly sure when it happened. He used to be completely okay (well, sort of), but at some point his mental state went south.

Maybe it was after the summer training camp. Almost being murdered was supposed to be traumatizing, right? No, that couldn't be it. He hadn't been kidnapped like Katsuki. He hadn't *really* almost died, like Izuku. So there wasn't a reason for him to have trauma from *that*.

~~Watching your friends almost die . . . wouldn't have traumatized him. Yeah?~~

The USJ? No, he wasn't anywhere near the center of the fighting. He hadn't watched all the bones in Sensei's face shatter against the concrete floor of the courtyard; he hadn't seen Tsuyu's expression in the seconds before Shigaraki would turn her to dust in the wind. He hadn't seen All Might's fight with the Noumu. He'd been brain dead for most of that, there was no way he'd have trauma from it.

~~So why did he feel hazy all the time? Why couldn't he focus anymore? ADHD, okay, yeah, but even less than ADHD-not-focusing. Wasn't dissociation a *trauma* response?~~

What exactly constitutes *trauma* anyway?

Denki bet Katsuki was probably traumatized. Being kidnapped sounded terrifying. Shouto probably had some kind of trauma,

what with his aversion to Endeavor and general twitchy demeanour. But Denki wasn't like *that*. His parents were *good* ~~not~~, and he'd never been *kidnapped*.

~~Maybe the dissociation was a symptom of his ADHD. When was the last time he'd taken his meds? It would've been with his last meal, right? When was his last meal?~~

No. It wasn't *fair* that he wasn't okay. It wasn't fair to the people who had real reasons to be broken. No. He wasn't broken. He was *fine*. He'd always had ADHD. He could deal with it just fine on his own.

He was *fine*. He wasn't traumatized, just being dumb, like always. He had a good life. Good friends, good teachers. A good school. A totally normal and not-at-all abusive home life. He'd never had a near death experience; he'd never been abused or kidnapped or assaulted. He had no right to feel any kind of self-pity.

None of his "problems" were bad enough that he needed to bother someone else for help. He was okay on his own.

Really.

***

Denki had always hated this house.

He didn't really have a good reason ~~he had plenty of good reasons~~, but the place always put him on edge. He would have dinner as fast as he could, and then he'd leave. He could do this.

He slipped inside, removing his shoes by the door. “Mom? Dad? I’m home.”

Instead of either of them, his little brother, Hikari, came around the corner. “DENKI!” He hugged Denki around the knees, and Denki ruffled his hair fondly.

“Hey ‘Kari. Have you been good for Mom and Dad?”

Hikari smiled up at him bashfully. “I’m good *most* of the time!”

Denki chuckled. “That’a boy. Where’s Mom? I wanted to say hello.”

Hikari pulled on the sleeve of his shirt. “This way!” He led Denki through the house, ending at the kitchen.

His mother was slicing carrots, blonde hair tied in a tight bun on top of her head.

“Hey, Mom.” Denki smiled nervously.

“Oh. You’re home. Make yourself useful.” She didn’t look up from her task.

Denki slumped. “Yes, ma’am.”

With two pairs of hands working, dinner was ready much faster, and Denki’s father finally showed his face as they were sitting down to eat.

“Ah. Hello, son.”

Denki bowed his head. “Dad.”

Denki’s mother began eating, signaling that it was okay to do so. Denki pushed his food around on his plate.

His mother looked at him. “I noticed that you’re a little . . . softer than your classmates, Denki.”

Denki froze. She continued: “You just look a little chubby, is all. Nothing like those big muscles your friends have.”

Denki slowly set down his chopsticks, his stomach turning.

Denki’s father hummed. “I need you to do better, Denki. You have to keep up with your classmates if you want us to keep paying for you to go to UA.”

Denki nodded. “I understand.”

His father scoffed. “I wasn’t finished. This also applies to those grades of yours. Do better. No son of mine should be failing two classes.”

Denki’s heart crumbled. He had known this was coming, but he always had hope. He just wanted a *how are you, Denki?* every so often. He was tired of being told what he needed to work on. He knew he needed to work on building muscles and raising his grades. He *knew*. He knew he wasn’t good enough. But he was trying his best.

His mother smiled sweetly—almost sickeningly so. “At least you’re doing well in English. It is an important skill.”

Not as important as math. The words left unsaid hung over the table like a dark cloud.

Denki smiled back at her. *She cares about me. She's proud of me.* "Thank you, Mom."

Hikari butted in, rambling about the new toys he'd gotten while Denki was away. Both of his parents listened intently, smiling and nodding along and praising his every word. ~~*Why didn't Denki deserve that kind of attention?*~~ Denki grinned too. He remembered when he used to jabber on and on like that. His parents listened to him then ~~didn't they?~~, so it was only fair that they listened to Hikari.

Denki excused himself from the table without having taken a single bite of food.

~~He was "chubby" after all. Not like he hadn't noticed his difference in build compared to say, Eijirou or Izuku. He'd noticed. He didn't need his mother rubbing salt in the wound.~~

It was okay. She couldn't have known he'd already noticed. She was just looking out for him. Because she loved him.

She loved him.

***

Tap. Taptap. Tap tap.

Denki listened to the sound his pencil made as he hit it against his desk. *Tap taptap.* It seemed too loud to be produced by a

little stick of wood; the dull tapping drowned out most of the other sounds in the classroom.

Someone shifted, and so did Denki's focus. Izuku twitched on the other side of the room. Why did the rustle of Izuku's uniform sound so *loud*?

Wait, was the teacher talking? Denki forced his gaze to Present Mic's face. His mouth was moving. He was definitely talking. Whoops. Denki tried to focus on him. He sounded like he was underwater, his words muffled and incomprehensible to Denki.

There was a bird outside the window, flying around.

Denki watched it swoop away, and then back again. It would be cool to fly. One day he'd ask Hawks about flying. Hawks was pretty cool too. Didn't Fumikage do his work study with Hawks?

Denki's stomach rumbled, and he leaned forward in a weak attempt to soothe some of the pain. Had he skipped breakfast? Whoops. He'd eat at lunch ~~no, he wouldn't~~. Oh shoot, he was meant to be listening. Present Mic was writing something on the board. Something about a test? Damnit, he'd missed the whole lecture.

When was the last time he'd taken his meds again? Oh right. His mother had stopped shipping them to him. Did the doctor stop prescribing them? Or maybe she thought he was strong enough to handle it on his own! He felt a swell of pride at *finally* impressing her.

~~Hopefully she hadn't stopped giving them to him because she~~

~~thought he was weak.~~

He fiddled with a sticky note, unconsciously folding and unfolding the little piece of paper. He zoned out again, letting his mind drift. He barely registered himself clenching his hands into fists, fingernails digging into his skin as he slipped into the darkest corners of his brain.

~~You need to eat less, you stupid waste of space; why can't you be better do BETTER; your friends don't need you; you're just a burden—~~

Denki blinked, and the bright lights of the cafeteria glared back at him. What? When had he gotten there? His friends were laughing and teasing Katsuki, as always. His own lunch was untouched. His stomach rumbled again. Traitor.

He placed his palms on the table and pushed himself up, wobbling a little on his shaky legs.

Mina looked up at him. "Where're you going, Sparky?"

Denki laughed, rubbing the back of his head as he picked up his tray. "I asked Ectoplasm for extra help. I've gotta go see him."

Eijirou eyed his full bentou. "You didn't eat any lunch, bro."

~~Don't be a burden.~~ Denki waved him off. "I had a big breakfast, I'll be okay." *Since when did he lie about eating?*

Eijirou pursed his lips, but didn't question him further. Denki scurried off, dropping his lunch into the trash and heading to

the locker room.

His vision blurred as he went. He was fine.

He didn't need his meds to function. He had to eat less, to lose some of the baby fat. He had to train extra, to build muscles. Too bad he didn't *actually* have a meeting with Ectoplasm. He could really use the help. He'd thought about asking his friends, but he didn't want to bother them.

He changed into his gym clothes, ignoring the way his mind filled with fog when he entered the empty gymnasium. He didn't notice how exhausted he was. He didn't notice the pain from hitting the punching bag so hard bare-handed. He didn't notice the black edging around his already hazy vision.

He didn't notice people entering. He didn't notice that he moved on autopilot, going through the motions of practical hero studies.

He didn't notice his friends' worried glances.

He blinked. His eyes flicked open to see . . . his dorm room. *Fuck*. He'd floated through *hours of class*. The gnawing beast in his stomach alerted him that he hadn't eaten dinner. His hair was damp, too damp to be from sweat, so he must've showered. He'd changed into sweats.

He curled up on his bed, and sobbed.

~~He was fine, really.~~

***

Denki felt floaty again.

He figured it would wear off eventually. It always did. Or maybe he was always floaty. Would that mean that floaty was normal? Maybe. ~~Absolutely not.~~

He laid on his bed, staring at the wall. He counted the ridges in the paint until the tiny lines blurred together, the numbers in his head jumbling together and trailing away.

He tapped his finger against his blanket, hoping to release any of his trapped energy. It didn't really help, just made him more twitchy.

His thoughts drifted away from his room, from his body. He wasn't really thinking about anything, but he was thinking about everything. Half of his mind was blank, silent, suffocatingly so. A cacophony of broken noise ricocheted against the walls of his brain, mindless sounds blurring together that would probably mean something if Denki could focus hard enough to understand what he was hearing.

He couldn't. It was ~~not~~ okay.

Something pierced his bubble of discord. "Kamibro?"

Eijirou? Maybe. His voice echoed from a distance. "Kamibro, are you okay?"

Denki shook himself back to his body, blinking dazedly at his

friend. "'M totally good. Little . . . floaty. How far away are you? Come inside, I can't hear you through the glass."

Eijirou stepped closer, eyebrows furrowing in concern.

"Kami, I'm right here."

"Oi, Dunce Face!" Katsuki. "Get your ass up! Yo, Shitty Hair, what's taking so long?" He sounded even farther away than Eijirou.

"Something's wrong, Bakugou. Come in here." Why does Eijirou sound so *upset*?

A scoff. Wow, that was *loud*. Why was his brain picking up on that sound, but not their speech? Whatever. "Whaddya mean? Something's wrong, tch—oh." A hand was waved in front of his face, maybe? "Dunce Face? Did you overuse your shitty quirk, or something?"

Denki blinked again, squinting through the fog hovering in front of his eyes. "Huh? No, I haven't used it since yesterday. Why are you so foggy? Are we in the sky?"

Katsuki took a step back, his body disappearing into the fog. *No, come back.*

Denki reached for them, and Eijirou took his hand. Some of the numbness went away. "That's better, Kiri."

Katsuki didn't speak for a minute. "I'll be right back."

Denki frowned, the fog too thick for him to see Katsuki leaving anyway. “Wait, no, don’t leave.”

Eijirou squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry bro, he’ll be back in a bit.” He gave Denki a strange look. “Bro, when was the last time you ate? You look pale.”

Denki’s stomach rumbled. “Uhhh . . . Thursday, maybe? I had an apple, I think.”

Eijirou froze. “Denks, that was two days ago.”

Denki shrugged. “‘M fat.”

Eijirou moved closer, his mouth opening as if he wanted to say something, but noise in the hallway distracted him. “Just, come here, okay?”

“Kacchan, I don’t understand—oh. Hey, Kirishima. He’s not doing so well, huh?” Was that . . . Izuku? Katsuki went to get Izuku? Why?

Eijirou shook his head. Izuku came forward. “Hey, Kaminari? I need you to do something for me. Do you think you can manage that?”

Denki felt himself nod. Izuku smiled. “Okay, great. Can you tell me three things you can feel?”

Denki focused on Izuku through the fog, which was lessening. “Kiri’s hand. Uhm, my blanket? Uhh . . .” He frowned. “The air?”

Izuku laughed, but it wasn’t a happy laugh. “Okay, good.

Two things you can hear?"

Denki smiled. "You talking. I heard Bakubro scoff earlier."

The fog cleared some more. Izuku looked relieved. "Are you back?"

Denki rubbed his head, groaning. "I think? Where'd I go?"

It hit him then, how much of a burden he was being. "Ah! I'm sorry for dragging you in here!"

Izuku frowned. "Kaminari. . . ."

Denki smiled weakly at his friends. "I'm fine! Don't worry, I can handle it!"

Katsuki scoffed again, tossing a small bottle at Denki. "You haven't been taking your shitty meds. Or fucking eating."

Denki looked away. "No."

Izuku took Denki's other hand, the one Eijirou wasn't holding. "Kaminari, let us help. Please."

Denki felt tears well up in his eyes. ~~*So useless*~~. "Okay. Okay."

Izuku pulled him in for a hug. "You're gonna be okay.

We're right here."

~~*But he's NOT okay; he's not; he's a burden; he shouldn't LET THEM DO THIS—*~~

"Okay."

He let Izuku hug him, and he cried. He'd be okay.

A Spoonful Of Purpose
Bogganheart

Very few people knew the extent of All Might's limitations after his battle with One for All, and fewer still could he rely on for heartfelt advice. So when All Might came to their weekly lunch meetup agitated and guilt-ridden because he wore himself out too much to respond to an emergency, Naomasa did the only thing a friend could do; he listened and he tried to help.

"You need to trust that other heroes will pick up the slack, Yagi-san." Naomasa leaned back against the booth seat and sighed sympathetically.

"But what if they can't? What if no one's there or the heroes that are there aren't suited for the situation?"

He raised a skeptical brow. "Was that the case with the incident you responded to yesterday morning?"

"No," All Might conceded, "but I was closest, so I responded first." It was an ingrained habit, built through years of dashing from one incident to another.

"And what about the one after that? Did another hero resolve it?"

"Eventually. . . ."

"Yagi-san, I'm not going to invalidate your concerns here. Japan is fundamentally less safe today than it was six months ago, and it would be disrespectful of me to pretend otherwise,"

Naomasa admitted. "Your efforts alone have saved countless lives over the years, and I can't even begin to imagine how much responsibility that has placed on your shoulders."

All Might's friend met his eyes with sincerity and placed a comforting hand on his bony forearm. "I know that every fibre of your being wants to fight and keep carrying that weight like you always have, but there are times when even the strongest spirits are constrained by physical limitations. There is no shame in acknowledging that."

All Might scowled and pulled away. "I cannot see someone crying out for help and do nothing, Naomasa-san! You don't understand how much it kills me to stand aside! I have never felt so useless in my life, not even before One for All."

Silence stretched out between them as embarrassment sunk in. All Might knew his friend was trying his best to help; he didn't deserve that outburst. But it was so frustrating to suddenly be so weak. . . . To be the one who needs help. He sipped at his milkshake but could only taste his own bitterness.

"You can still help, Yagi-san," Naomasa chided kindly. "You can still save people; you just need to be smart about it. How long can you hold your full-figured form these days?"

He tried to push past the overwhelming sense of failure and assess his condition objectively. "Almost three hours. The physical therapy and water aerobics really have been helping with my stamina. My grip on my quirk is getting firmer too. Everything still feels shaky in the last fifteen minutes, but I have a much better sense of when my time is running out now than when I was

released from the hospital."

"Three hours is a long time. You can do a lot in three hours if you budget it correctly."

"What do you mean? Three hours is practically nothing!"

Naomasa shook his head, chuckling wryly to himself. "You remember my sister, Makoto, right?"

"Of course! She returned from America again just a while ago, right? Is she still working as an agency manager?" All Might furrowed his brow at the sudden diversion in conversation, but he wasn't going to be rude about it.

"No, she actually hasn't had that role for years now, not since she worked with Captain Celebrity," Naomasa said. "But, she's still involved in agency work to some degree. I bring Makoto up because your frustration sounds almost exactly like what she expressed to me when she was first diagnosed with fibromyalgia. She's always been ambitious and career-driven, so it was a huge blow for her. She struggled a lot with finding a way to continue her work while accommodating for flare-ups."

"Oh, I never even realized she was ill! She always seemed so . . ." All Might trailed off, remembering the young woman's enthusiastic grin. Was she also smiling to reassure those around her? Did she also fight this crushing self-loathing and hopelessness?

"Like many disabilities, hers is invisible, but it impacts her daily life immensely. She's had to be very careful about how she

spends her time and energy in order to have enough for the things that really matter to her. There are sacrifices, of course, but she makes—wait a moment, I can share the analogy she used to explain it all to me!" Naomasa stood abruptly and strode over to the counter.

All Might strained his ears to hear his conversation with the young waitress but the restaurant chatter drowned out his words. His curiosity piqued when his friend returned with a large handful of teaspoons and an excited smile.

"You'll have to bear with me. . . . I've only heard it once so I'm not sure I'll do it justice, but you can look up the 'Spoon Theory' later if you want a better sense of how it is applied. So, you would agree that each of us is working with a certain amount of energy at a time, yes?"

All Might nodded as Naomasa laid the spoons out in a tidy row across the table between them.

"Alright! Let's say these spoons represent that energy for someone who has a chronic illness like my sister's. Some people have more energy than others." He picked two spoons up and motioned to the remainder. Placing the two back down, he added, "And some days have more than others. This is the case for everyone to some extent. . . . Some days are just very stressful; sometimes you sleep poorly; some days you have a headache. All of those things affect the amount of energy—or in this case, the number of spoons—this person has at their disposal. Let's walk through a normal day. . . . How would that play out?" He looked at All Might expectantly.

“Well, first, I suppose one would wake up, get ready for work, make breakfast. . . .”

“You’re absolutely right, but let’s slow it down a bit. So first, they wake up. Do they take a shower before they get dressed?”

“I would imagine they would, yes.”

Naomasa picked one spoon up. “And then? . . .”

“Then they’d get dressed and prepare their things for the day.” Another spoon lifted off the table.

“Do you think they’d prepare a proper meal for breakfast?”

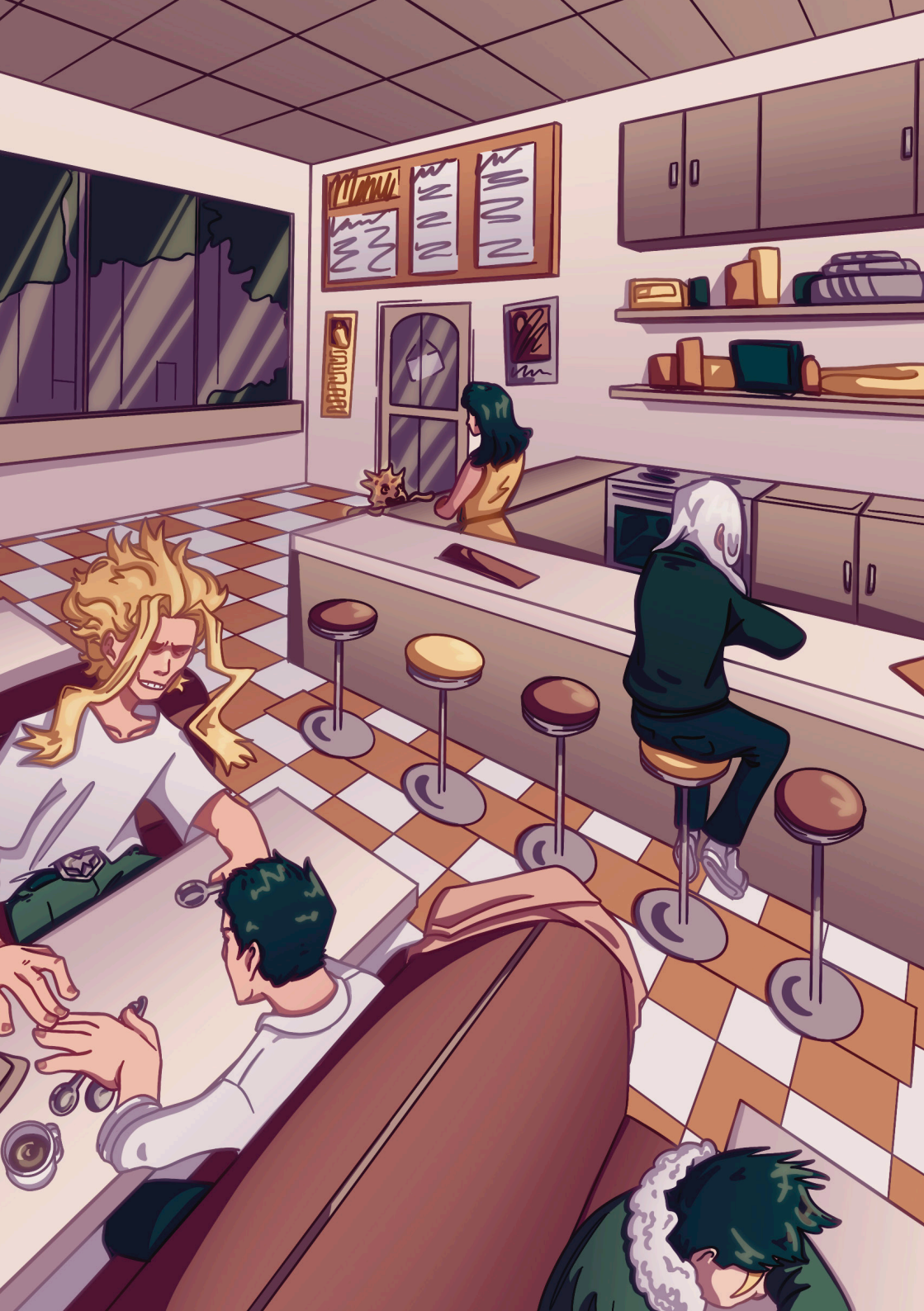
“One would hope so.” All Might startled as Naomasa scooped three spoons up at once. “Wait, what if they had something simple that didn’t require cooking? Something they picked up from the combini on the corner perhaps?”

Naomasa returned two spoons to the table with a small smile. “It seems you already understand how this works to a certain extent, Yagi-san. Let’s say they buy both their breakfast and lunch at the combini. What next?”

“I assume they would go into work.”

“Of course. Let’s be kind and say their commute is not terribly long, only a half-hour. Do they walk to the station or do they take a taxi?”

“Paying for a taxi every day sounds excessive, especially after



purchasing meals. If it's not too far, I'm sure they'd still walk."

Naomasa picked up two spoons. "Ah, but they work during normal business hours so the trains are packed. They need to stand for most of the time."

All Might didn't get a chance to protest before he whisked two more spoons off of the table.

The poor person's day had barely started and yet a third of the spoons were gone. This was exactly what hero work felt like now! Simple rescues that barely registered as effort before his injury now took so much out of him, it was like the day was over before it even began.

After walking through a standard workday, they were left with only three spoons and a whole list of chores, self-care activities, and social obligations to weigh against each other. All Might's head spun at the implications.

"Your sister, how does she do it?"

"Well, she focuses on her priorities and delegates as much as possible," Naomasa explained. "She started her own consulting business, helping agencies handle PR crises and large events, and she only takes on the projects she feels she can handle at the time as her symptoms come and go. She's also hired very competent assistants and passes the simpler tasks associated with each contract to them."

All Might nodded, deep in thought. "But how does she determine which projects she should work on? I'm sure she doesn't

want to back out on any once she's committed."

"Actually, she told me something that I think would also serve you well. She said that she only accepts cases that specifically require her level of expertise. There's a lot of PR work that any good agent could handle, just like there are a lot of battles and rescues that most heroes could take care of. She focuses her limited energy on the things that need her particular attention because she can make the most impact that way."

That sounded wise in theory, but All Might couldn't imagine putting it into practice. Who was he to decide who needed saving?

"I'm not sure I could do that. I . . . I don't know how I could face myself, knowing that I didn't do my best for everyone. What kind of hero would I be?"

"Yagi-san, you can't be everything for everyone. None of us can. Sometimes you need to step aside and have faith in the strength of others so you can save your efforts for the person out there that doesn't just need help from someone . . . they need help from you."

"And what about the days where that person isn't found? I can't just sit there, useless, just *in case* someone might need me later."

All Might knew his workaholism was no secret; friends had voiced concerns in the past. But he was given this power for a purpose. . . . How could he be idle and remain worthy of it? He poured every bit of himself into hero work. He couldn't even remember who he was without it.

Yagi-san, can I ask you something?"

"Of course!"

"What motivates your hero work? Why did you choose to become a hero? What keeps you risking your life day in and day out?" Naomasa studied him contemplatively.

"Obviously, because the world needs a symbol of peace!"

"Yes, but . . . *why* does it?"

"Well, because . . ." All Might stammered, "because it deters villains from committing crimes and because people deserve to feel safe."

"Hmm, have you considered," Naomasa tentatively posited, "other things you might be able to do that would contribute to that goal? Things that perhaps wouldn't require your full strength?"

"I mean, I still do public appearances . . . although that's part of the problem too." He grimaced. "It feels so wasteful when I could be out there actively saving someone."

"I was thinking perhaps something more meaningful. You mentioned, a few weeks back, taking an offer to teach at UA in order to find a successor."

"Yes, I can't let it end with me," All Might said, full of conviction.

"Agreed, but your legacy could be so much more. What would it be like if, instead of simply using the position to find your

successor, you threw yourself into guiding those youths to become the best heroes they can be? You can plan lessons in your down time and then, instead of one symbol of peace now, people can put that trust in multiple later. You could make the world a safer place by investing in tomorrow, Yagi-san, instead of destroying yourself today."

"Perhaps. But Naomasa-san, I don't know the first thing about teaching!" It was flattering to know he had such faith in him, but teaching heroes sounded like a daunting responsibility!

Naomasa smiled warmly at his flustered tone and handed him the last spoon that sat on the counter. "That's fair, but you can learn. If anyone can rise to the challenge, my friend, it's you."

Hyperfixations Are Like Blowtorches
orkestrations

The halls of UA are quiet as Izuku walks through them. During their day off from classes, few people spend time in the main building, and normally, Izuku would be back at Height's Alliance, studying in his room or hanging out with his classmates.

Today, he's on the hunt for a different friend.

He walks across the campus wearing a simple hoodie and gym pants since uniforms aren't regulated on student off days. Entering the doors of the main building, he follows the winding hallways until they open to the support course workshops.

This time, thankfully, Izuku isn't met by the doors to the workshop being blown outward off their hinges by one of Mei's mishaps. Instead, he eases one of them open and slips from the quiet of the hallway to the cacophony of a dozen support students, all working on individual projects. Today's supervising teacher sits at one end of the room, keeping half an eye on the students and half an eye on whatever they're typing into the workshop's heavy-duty desktop computer.

Izuku heads directly for the far back corner, weaving between tables and tool cabinets and ducking under a wrench someone accidentally sent flying. Mei is, as always, tucked away from everyone else, face drawn in concentration as she solders something small together.

He's content enough to sit down on a nearby workbench and wait for her to finish her soldering job rather than interrupt her

and risk an accident or a mess-up. He doesn't even have to wait that long—between her quirk and her experience, she's a fast hand at delicate jobs like this, and soon, she's flipping up the mask and setting down the torch.

"Hey, Mei!" He raises his voice so it cuts above the clanks and crashes of the other support students.

She startles, whipping around to face him with a—where the hell did she get that blowtorch from so fast?

"Whoa, Ten Mil! When did you get there?" She doesn't even set the blowtorch down before she's pouncing on him, hovering in his space and poking and prodding at his "You sure snuck in! How are the new braces doing? Any problems? You here with some more ideas? Oh! Did I ever remember to thank you for getting me in contact with Melissa? She is a goddess in human form, I swear—anyways!" She takes a step back, grinning with her hands on her hips. "What can I do for you?"

"Um, the braces are great!" There's no way he can address every point of Mei's spiel, but he picks out the most important parts to respond to. "I haven't noticed any problems with them and they're working so well. That's, they're, uh, they're not what I'm here for, actually?"

"Oh?" Mei's eyes gleam as she grins. "So you have a new idea, then?"

"Uh." He ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck with one hand. "I. Actually just. Want to talk? About something."

Mei takes two steps over and sits down on the workbench next to him, leaning her back against the table and setting her blowtorch down on it. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, okay, uh . . ." He threads his fingers together to keep his hands still and takes a deep breath. "So you're
. . . you're ADHD, and autistic, and . . . you've talked about it a bit before? I was just wondering . . . how you . . . figured it out? I guess."

Mei chuckles. "There wasn't much figuring it out on my end. I was really young when I got my autism diagnosis, and I was barely into middle school when I was diagnosed with ADHD, too. Why do you ask? Do you think you might have one or the other? Or both? Both is fun."

"Uh . . . I've just . . . been doing some reading lately." His hands may be still, but his leg is not, jittering up and down. "Some of the things that ADHD people and autistic people talk about just . . . feel familiar."

"Oh? Things like what?"

He glances over at Mei to see her looking at him, head cocked, a curious tilt in her eyebrow. That's one of the things he likes most about her; she's so easy to read, and so honest. He's never left second-guessing her intent or the motivation behind something she says.

"Things like—so sometimes, I'll get . . . I'll get so caught up in something, and I won't even notice time passing? Like I'll get started on something before dinner and then the next thing I

know, it's one in the morning and I haven't eaten.

Mei groans. "Oh, I feel that."

He had thought she probably would, considering how many times he comes in to find her in the middle of a twelve-hour workshop session, or how many times he hears about Power Loader having to chase her out to eat and shower and take care of herself.

"And there's other things, too, like, the concept of special interests explains so much about—about the things I like, and sensory processing issues make so much sense because I can't wear certain textures because they just feel like . . . sandpaper, or like I'm wearing a paper bag, or something like that. And, and, food textures?"

"Food textures," Mei agrees, nodding sagely. "Bad mouthfeel."

"And it explains—it explains some of . . . some of my . . . social issues, growing up. Not all of them, but it really . . . It makes sense. It's like I found the answer to a question I never even knew I had to ask."

For a moment, Mei is quiet, nodding at him. "You know, it makes a lot of sense! I made friends with you so easy and that just doesn't happen for me! It's—you know, neurodivergent people tend to . . . tend to . . . to move in cohorts! You never just have one neurodivergent person in a friend group. It's like we flock together!"

Considering Izuku's friend group? That makes so much sense.

"So,"—Mei leans in closer—"you've been thinking about this for a while?"

"Yeah, I . . ." He nods. "Yeah, it's been a couple months." He's almost ashamed to admit how deep his dive into this topic has gone, but, no, this is Mei.

There's no need for him to be self-conscious about that here.

"I . . . may have been spending more time researching this than I've spent on my homework recently."

"Ah, hyperfixations," Mei sighs. "Gotta love them. Have you taken any of the online screening tests? They're not diagnostic tools on their own but that doesn't mean they're not accurate."

"I've . . . taken a few of them. Some of them multiple times. The scores have been . . . pretty consistent."

She nods. "I've taken a few of the online screening tests just for fun. In my opinion, if you're getting consistent scores out of them, then whatever conclusion they're coming to is probably correct!"

Izuku nods, unlacing his fingers and letting his left hand tap a rhythm out on his knee. "I'm just . . . not sure what to do with this information now that I have it."

"Talk to your teacher? Talk to Hound Dog? Talk to your mom? Your mom's pretty cool, right? She'd listen to you!"

"Yeah . . . yeah." He takes a moment to inhale deeply, and turns,

smiling up at Mei. “Thanks for . . . Thanks for listening to me. I appreciate it. Do you want to talk support gear now?”

“Do I—” Mei gasps, leaping up from the bench. “Do I want to talk support gear? Do I ever! I always want to talk support gear! Hit me! What’ve you got?”

Izuku’s smile widens as he stands up and follows her back to her own workstation. He doesn’t have anything in mind for himself, but, well, he’s always happy to toss ideas around with her.

Before long, Mei’s explosions are, once again, driving her classmates to distraction, and Izuku’s right there next to her the entire time.

After all, it’s always fun to indulge in hyperfixations with your close friends.

Help Me Help You
Princeliest

Rumi carefully pulls the fingers of her brand-new metal arm into a fist, winds it back, and heaves from the hip to punch the table so hard that she leaves a dent in it.

"Yes!" she cheers, panting through gritted teeth. Sharp pain drills into her shoulder and a dull ache radiates down her back, but she pushes through it to raise her arm in triumph. The muscle memory of a good punch is just plain gone when she doesn't have any muscles for it to work with, but she's still got her stuff. Cheap aluminum tables today, villain's faces tomorrow.

Dr. Takemoto, a slight and elderly woman whom Rumi knows for taking absolutely no shit, sighs and picks up a fat pencil from where Rumi's move had sent it flying. She'd scattered more than that, truth be told—the pencil, several papers, and even Dr. Takemoto's paperclip and significantly less clunky pens all went skittering across the supposedly-soothing blue and yellow hospital flooring.

"Congratulations," Dr. Takemoto tells Rumi dryly. "You sure showed that table."

Last week, her old prosthetist's reaction might have been more alarmed. In fact, it was—the guy quit, citing citing that he was unused to working directly with such high-profile clients. If you ask Rumi, he was just a wimp who chickened out the first time someone didn't want to deal with his condescending drone. Regardless, Dr. Takemoto is his replacement.

鬼人

Rumi loves and hates the spine on this woman in equal measure.

"Sure did," Rumi snipes, rolling her eyes. "And that's enough for you to know I'm *fine* with this damn arm, isn't it? Tell me that wouldn't lay out your average villain in one hit. I'm try'n'a show you I'm *ready to do my job*, already!"

"You already showed me that you're capable of the fine motor function required to make a fist *yesterday*," Dr. Takemoto replies. "Now show me you can write your name."

She slides the scattered papers together into a stack, taps each side against the table to align them, and gently places the stack back in front of Rumi, extra-thick pencil neatly by its side. The dent in the table, one of three so far, is a glaring reminder of Rumi's frustration mere inches from the worksheet she'd been working on.

"It's just as important, Ms. Usagiyama," Dr. Takemoto murmurs.

Rumi shifts, sighing, and tugs at the cloth of the shrinker under her arm. It's another new aspect of her life, though theoretically a more temporary one than losing her whole damn arm—and if she thought underwire bras were uncomfortable, well. There's something about wearing a glorified sock on her shoulder stump that the docs told her was there to shrink what she had left *even further* that grates.

It bunches up under her armpit, and she huffs, giving up on it in favour of leaning back in her seat and pointedly crossing *both* her arms. The metal one is obviously bulkier, but the point is that she *coordinates* it just fine. Sass and punching

things: what else does she *really* need her arm for?

Dr. Takemoto raises her eyebrows. Rumi meets her stare dead-on, glare unwavering.

"Very well," Dr. Takemoto says. "We can take a break. But you don't get to hog this room to yourself when you're throwing tantrums and breaking furniture, so I'm letting the nurses know that the next patient is free to come in and use it."

"Whatever," Rumi says, dragging her eyes back to her worksheets.

Then it is quiet.

She's being petulant, and she knows it. But Rumi doesn't know what else to *be* when her emotions bubble up like this—creeping, all-consuming fear, tugging at her coattails every time she fumbles a pencil or drops one of her stacking bricks. It's ridiculous, that she can jump into a fight that loses her a whole damn arm and then some with hardly a blink at the threat to her life, but doing her fucking letters is where the despair starts to sink in.

Rumi doesn't *do* despair. Rumi does brute force, fighting strength, and sheer, unstoppable power. She'll get her arm ripped off by a noumu and tie her hair around the stump as a tourniquet to keep fighting. *That's* who she is.

It's just, right now, she's also someone who's stuck flunking out of physical therapy because she can't write her own name.

The door to Rumi's PT room clicks open, first bumping haphazardly to its halfway point before whoever is trying to enter sighs

and just hits the automatic door button. They don't bother with the hand sanitizer attached to the wall by the door, so probably not a doctor or nurse. Or just a negligent one.

Rumi finally turns, just in time to watch Pro Hero Hawks half-stumble into the room, lugging a wheeled four-point walker behind him in a way that seems supremely unhelpful in actually helping him to walk.

He shoulders through the door before it's quite all the way open and then catches himself on the door frame, one hand pulling the walker from behind him and sending it skidding into proper position. That done, he glances up—and blinks rapidly, straightening up.

"Oh," he says. "Yo. Didn't realize this was occupied. Would'a heard you normally, but, eh . . ."

He jerks a thumb at the conspicuous nothingness behind his shoulders. Right. His quirk, Fierce Wings, was also a form of sensory perception for him, wasn't it?

Rumi raises an eyebrow. "That walker help you fly, feathers? Didn't realize you needed wings to *walk*."

He huffs a laugh, leans into the walker, and uses it to wheel over to her table and plop himself right on top of it. The maneuver successfully messes up Dr. Takemoto's efforts to straighten Rumi's physical therapy worksheets.

"Didn't realize *you* needed an arm to see," he shoots back with a grin. "I'm a bit off-balance, is all. Usually when I lose my

feathers, I've at least got the *stumps* left behind, but good ol' Endeavor trains his kids well, I guess. Dabi made sure to get every last scrap of wing. It's like half my senses are gone. I feel like an octogenarian!"

"Huh," she ponders. "What about one of those seeing-eye canes?"

The smile drops off of Hawks's face as the words hit him, and he looks genuinely contemplative for a moment. ". . . Ah, nah. Wouldn't cover anything my eyes aren't already getting, and the feathers'll grow back *eventually*. Now, if you can figure out a way to set up a circulating set of microphones and feed 'em directly to my *brain* . . ."

"Guess that means you're off duty, too," Rumi mutters.

Hawks shrugs, swinging his feet idly, then nods. The motion smacks his heels into the table legs and sends her writing utensils rattling.

"This blows chunks," Rumi declares. "We're top ten heroes, and they don't even trust us with our own health. How are *you* so blasé about this, bird boy? I'm sitting here losing my marbles over one arm, and you've ended up basically quirkless!" She gestures wildly at the dents she's left in the table. "I'm perfectly capable! Don't you want to go back to your *job*?"

The smile is back on Hawks's face, plastered on and faker than Rumi's arm. He laughs a little, rubbing at the back of his neck, and stares at his swinging feet.

"Not sure I'm even gonna *have* a job after this," he admits, "wings or

no wings."

Rumi scoffs. "Whatever. You're the top ten's golden boy. Like you're not gonna have everyone eating outta the palm of your hand in two months, max."

"Hey, look!" Hawks chirps, spreading his hands out in front of his face and wiggling his fingers. "A distraction! Guess who's been slacking on adjusting my compression sleeve 'cause it makes me feel super vulnerable? That's me opening up to you, bee tee dubs. I'm trying to establish an emotional connection here so that you feel guilty for dragging me like that."

"Who's been slacking?" Rumi deadpans. "You mean the nurses? Who are supposed to be doing that *for* you?"

"I might've escaped my hospital bed," Hawks confesses.

"Jesus Christ," Rumi says, and presses her palms to the table to shove herself up for a better angle. "Turn around, you goddamn disaster."

Pleased as punch, Hawks flashes her a grin before whirling around to bare his back to her. He makes a show of folding his hands in his lap like an overly contrite schoolboy, and Rumi rolls her eyes, yanking on his ear for being a brat until he yelps and resumes his usual slouched posture.

"Should've stayed with the nurses," he mutters.

"If you don't appreciate my tender mercies," Rumi threatens, "you don't have to be here. Now sit still."

Hawks stills. Rumi has to give it to him—for all the blustering, it's pretty clear he's playing this situation smart. He's not actually blind, and in her experiences with Hawks, the guy has a keen eye for playing situations to his own goals. It just seems that, right now, his goal seems to be . . . helping Rumi.

He scattered the papers she was frustrated with. Presented himself as equally foolish in his fumbling. Won over her sympathies and bared his own insecurities so she could relate, while acknowledging the horseshit he's feeding her in a way she can't complain about. And now, he's given her another task: changing his bandages, fine motor skills required but stakes so, so much higher than stacking blocks or scribbling on paper.

She wants to be annoyed at getting played, but she can see the way his shoulders are trying not to hitch as she places a hand on his back, and thinks—that's not malice. That's a guy who keeps throwing himself on the line for everyone else, even when he's literally hospitalized. The least she could do is use the opportunity he's given her.

Of course, spy that he is, he's probably thought through that aspect of her reasoning, too. Or maybe he's just an idiot with no ego. It's hard to tell anymore.

"It's gotten loose," he murmurs. "And it's just velcro, but I can't reach it myself."

"I got it," she tells him quietly. "It's fine."

It is, in fact, fine. Her good hand doesn't shake, and her bad hand . . .

She does it pretty well, actually. She fumbles a few times, but while Hawks winces and clenches his fists, he doesn't hiss, and it doesn't take more than twice as long as a nurse would have. Rumi doesn't magically figure out how to perfectly handle her prosthetic, but it steadies her mind to think of the gravity of the situation and the fact that if she doesn't do this for Hawks then *nobody* will. It's a far cry from the simmering frustration that bubbles and flares like volcanic broth every time she so much as sees Dr. Takemoto's stupid stacking blocks.

It's possible that Rumi has been going about this the wrong way. She wants to be mad that Hawks is the one that figured it out, ostensibly about thirty seconds after getting into the room, but she's too busy trying not to look visibly grateful.

"You know," she tells him as she works, "maybe if you want to regain the public's trust, you should be more honest. Stop manipulating people into doing things, for a start."

Hawks shrugs, immediately winces at the motion, and snickers with chagrin into his palm instead. "It's all for your own good," he claims. "And it really did need doing anyways!"

"Uh-huh," Rumi says. "And I'd still slug you for it if you wouldn't keel over."

"Mean."

She pinches the last bit of velcro shut, giving it one final tug to make sure it's on tight over his slowly budding wing stumps and the swathes of charred, grafted, and bandaged flesh all over his neck and back.

“You ain’t seen me mean yet,” Rumi informs him, and she shoves him back around so they’re sitting on the table side by side, knees knocking and feet propped up on the bench.

“. . . Thanks,” Rumi says at the same time as Hawks. They both stop, automatic, and then she laughs.

“Yeah, well,” Rumi tells him, “sometimes you need somebody to help knock the sense into ya. Maybe I can’t go back to being a hero yet, but at least I’ll be here to save *your* feathery ass.”

Hawks smiles, small and closed-mouthed. For the first time, it looks genuine. “Yeah,” he says. “I think a little saving would do us both good.”

A Final Duet For The Road
Starry

Gym Gamma in itself is a large empty building that houses many hero hopefuls who want to improve their fighting skills and everything else that comes with the occupation. Even so, Katsuki still wants to watch his back every step of the way, always tense and anxious.

This is nothing new. Katsuki has known since Kamino Ward and the Sludge villain that he'll be looking over his shoulder for the rest of his career. Especially since he had pushed himself, *strained* everything in him to save their upcoming Symbol of Peace, and ultimately ended up with the scar that sits splayed on his chest.

It's a sign that he fought and survived against one of the strongest villains they've ever encountered, but Katsuki still remembers the blinding agony when he plummeted to the cracked earth below. Although he can use his Explosions to propel himself through the sky, there's moments when he'll stutter in his flight and have to settle back on the ground.

(It's the tiny things, of course; Ashido constantly checks her surroundings, Yaoyorozu is always ready for a fight, and Todoroki . . . well. He's doing his best, but they'll always think of the moment Midoriya was slated for a coma. Katsuki almost ripped out his IVs when he heard the news.)

It feels like everyone's improving as fast as they can, training harder and harder until someone almost drops from exhaustion. Quirks are being pushed to their limits, but unfortunate-

ly with Katsuki's, it means his ears ring more than ever, so he's forced to turn off his hearing aids just to slam a Howitzer Impact into the concrete.

The back of his neck tingles.

Katsuki whirls around, hands shaking and glaring at anyone within reach. There's only Sero, who's trying to see if they can perfect a throwing move with Uraraka from their time on Nabu Island (and something in Katsuki's memory swirls at the mention of their trip), and Deku, who's been using Float to try and slingshot himself across the gym and land perfectly. Cementoss watches from a distance with his cement columns, a bit on edge since Midoriya hasn't broken a bone in about three weeks.

No one's watching him. Aizawa's not even there; he's out training Shinsou in more hand-to-hand combat, since he missed out on the war and was one of the only kids of class 3-A to not come out fully traumatized. Due to how half the class keeps running like a well-oiled machine even on the brink of destruction, Shinsou's working as hard as they all are, sometimes asking Katsuki himself for training.

He turns down his hearing aids even more, trying to block out the ringing in his ears, and decides to exit the gym before anything else can happen. He coaxes the sparks building in his palms to a faint whiff of smoke and hurries outside, doing his best to ignore the burning tears in his eyes.

In the distance, a faint sound of "KACCHAN!" echoes and Katsuki grits his teeth. *Of fucking course.*

When he's clear of the doorway, Katsuki spins around and jabs a finger into Midoriya Izuku's chest. "*What*, Deku?" he growls, trying to keep eye-level with one of Yuuei's top students. They've managed to take over the mantle of U.A's current Big Three, with Yaoyorozu at their side, but they all know it's just a pretty title for the rest of the world. "The fuck you want?"

Midoriya frowns. Even with their budding . . . *friendship*, he guesses, it's still instinct to snap and snarl at one of the people that knows him best. (Kirishima sits next to Midoriya in that aspect, his kind smile and cheerful demeanor fitting right in, and Katsuki hates that they're good at ensuring he's okay and still breathing.) "I saw you leave and I wanted to make sure you were okay. Is everything alright?"

Damn Deku and his goddamn impulsive nature. Katsuki can definitely see the nightmares taking a toll on him too; his eye-bags are darker and he can't quite control the flinches yet. The prosthetic arm that's currently crossed under his other arm, eerily similar to Miruko's, shakes and tends to break apart if he goes over 50%.

(One for All is not kind, nor has it ever been, and yet Deku wields it like a champion raising their sword, bloodied and fierce. Katsuki has brief flickers of a power that raged through his veins and whispered age-old secrets in his ringing ears, and it nearly ripped him apart. His Quirk built to a monumental range that he could unleash against Nine, and Deku has this power flowing through his body every single second for the rest of his life.)

(Katsuki has held it once. He doesn't ever want to hold it again.)

"Of course I'm fine," Katsuki retorts, baring his teeth as Midoriya gets closer. "Get the fuck away from me, asshole. Stop trying to bother me."

The unfortunate thing about Midoriya Izuku is that he's incredibly fucking perceptive; Katsuki doesn't know if this is an undiscovered Quirk that went under the radar, but it's been serving him well with his meddling nature.

"I know you're not fine," Midoriya quietly replies. "Do you really think I wouldn't recognize this, Kacchan? We've *both* gone through a lot, okay? You're not the only one going through it."

Katsuki frowns, but wisely says nothing as he reaches up to turn his hearing aids higher. He can still feel the pain that pulses in his chest and decides to retort, "Of course I'm not. I never said I was, alright? But I *hate* people getting behind me; it keeps making me tense up and I'm TIRED of it!"

"I know how you feel!" Midoriya bursts out. "Do you remember the mall trip our first year? Where Shigaraki and I had a lovely chat about heroes and I tried not to die? He put his hand around my throat, four fingers pressed into my trachea, and if I swallowed too hard his fifth finger would've ended my life. So *yeah*, I can definitely understand not wanting anyone near your neck and keeping an eye on everything."

Ah. This is something that Midoriya does often. Everyone knows he's their resident problem child (Aizawa's words, reinforced over the past two years), and Midoriya can't keep himself out of trouble. The only thing is, with all the adventures and trauma he goes through, no one gets the full story of

what he's accomplished. There's rumours that he was directly involved with Stain, Overhaul, and other villains, but Midoriya refuses to spill the beans, and the other classmates involved are also sworn to secrecy. Apparently, they legally can't say anything until they all graduate, and Katsuki wants to see if one of them spills it before then.

". . . I didn't know that," is what Katsuki decides to say instead. "Is it worse with One for All, amplified or some shit with someone else's quirk?" Katsuki grunts, turning to head down one of the grassy pathways. "Walk with me, idiot. I don't want to stick around in an enclosed area for any longer. Reminds me of those stupid marbles from Compress."

"Gotcha," Midoriya murmurs, and he falls in line next to Katsuki as they take a stroll from Gym Gamma.

They take a moment to look around at the scenery; the birds are chirping and the sun's setting, which means the moon's bound to rise soon, hopefully. Katsuki *hates* new moons since it means he has to deal with the dark.

Judging by the way Midoriya's getting a bit more tense with green lightning flickering through his fingertips, Katsuki's not the only one. Katsuki watches him for a few moments, completely deadpan as he takes in Midoriya's movements. It's also a bittersweet feeling; knowing this moron from childhood, alongside having to see him grow up and get more reckless, means he can read him like a damn book.

"What do you do when your shit acts up?" Katsuki asks, gesturing to the arm and receiving a weak smile in return. "Do you . . .

talk to people? Or something? All Might?"

"Oh, sometimes." Midoriya lets out a small laugh. "I don't like to bother people with all my stuff, y'know? Only if they went through the same thing I did, which is super crappy, but even then I might not want to. I don't want to bring anyone's day down!"

Katsuki exhales, pinches the bridge of his nose, and turns to give him an incredulous look. "Aren't you the fucking therapist friend of your group? What good are you if you can't tell your friends the same problems you're having? That shit goes BOTH ways! How are you supposed to get better at everything if you don't do that? You can work on your stupid power all you want, but how are you gonna be number one if you don't deal with your own issues? I talk to Hound Dog once a week, you ass. I should ask if you're allowed to join me. Dunno what joint therapy rules are with him."

He finishes his rant and isn't ready for a snort of surprise. Midoriya's staring at him with wide eyes but his prosthetic is pressed over his mouth, stifling laughter that's already starting to spill over the edges of his fingertips. "Kacchan, are you *serious*? Man, I never would've thought . . . I think I really needed this talk. You and I still have a lot to talk about from when we shared One for All, ha."

"Wait, what?

"I think," Midoriya says slowly, like he didn't just blow Katsuki's mind with that sentence, "that we need to talk to Yuuei about this. Or at least our families and all our friends. They always talk

about the glory and glamour of heroes, but no one ever wants to get into the gritty parts of the aftermath. Of how we're always going to be dealing with this for the rest of our lives."

Katsuki takes a moment to *really* look at Midoriya Izuku. He's illuminated by the golden rays of this final sunset, and there's a spark in his eyes that hasn't been there in quite some time. "Always having a plan in your head, huh? Whatcha thinking about? Gonna do some research on PTSD and make a slideshow or something?"

"Something like that! I'd like you to help, if that's okay. I . . . I know how hard it can be to talk about this. Especially with the Sludge villain," Midoriya admits, wringing his hands nervously. "I was talking to Kirishima about this too, since he remembered reading about this in the news, but I can't *believe* no one stopped the heroes from putting a damn *muzzle* on you at the Sports Festival. They restrained you like he did, and no one said anything. I'm going to talk to U.A. about that too. I'm *furious* about that, Kacchan. We're supposed to be the good guys."

Katsuki's throat closes up, but nods and looks away, trying to stall the slight burning sensation in his eyes. "Yeah. Thanks, Deku."

Midoriya's eyes soften and he makes sure he's in Katsuki's line of sight before he gently bumps his shoulder. "What are friends for? Let's start heading back, I think we're going to have a movie night! Yaomomo said she's going to string up some fairy lights so it'll look super pretty, and there's gonna be a bunch of popcorn and sweets. I was thinking about making some katsudon while I was at it—"

YEAH. THANKS, DEKU
WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?

“HA! Yeah right, nerd. Like I’ll let you cook in our kitchen. I’ll make you some myself so you’ll know what greatness tastes like.” Katsuki rolls his eyes and ignores the beaming smile from his oldest friend.

They start walking back together, shoulder to shoulder, and Midoriya says into the early night, “Sounds like a plan, Katsuki.”

Katsuki’s heart seizes, and he retorts, “Shut up, Izuku. Get better or else we won’t be the best hero partners Japan has to offer.”

Between the stars starting to come out, and Midoriya’s bright and vibrant laughter, Katsuki really, really thinks he’s going to be okay. Everything’s going to be alright; it’ll just take time, patience, and a whole lot of effort.

Katsuki takes a deep breath, and heads back inside Heights Alliance with Midoriya at his side.

一蓮托生